

EXPIATION

BY J. D. BERESFORD

AT the time his co-operation had seemed obvious and necessary.

Jensen had begun by being philosophical. He had argued that no man could possibly be compelled to live the kind of life that lay before him for the next two years—the extreme limit that had been forecast for him. Then he had become descriptive. "Think of me," Jensen had said, "slowly rotting; mental agony gradually giving place to physical agony. And the first part will be infinitely worse for me than for the average man because I know every detail of the process beforehand. I realize, now, how all my horrible anticipations will be drowned inch by inch in torture and discomfort. My mind will be wrecked. I shall lose all semblance of humanity and die shrieking like a mangled hare. . . ."

And at the time, Seeley had not paused to inquire why Jensen needed an accessory. It was not until he was sure that Jensen was actually dead that his own participation in the tragedy had presented itself in the light of a crime. Before that, so long as Jensen himself had still the last faint capacity for suffering and expression, he had appeared as the sole object worthy of consideration. It was so essentially *his* tragedy; and all Seeley's efforts had been directed to the task of lessening its terror. When he had argued he had had no thought of himself; he had been moved by the single impulse of sympathy. He had desired, with almost perfect self-forgetfulness, to do what was best for Jensen.

But when Jensen's spirit had hidden itself forever Seeley, in the first shock of loneliness, had felt a cold thrill of fear. This fear had had no connection with the chilled and stiffening figure that had

so recently represented the spirit of Jensen, but with the plain and practical conception of the consequences that might await himself. At the best he had been a willing accessory to a self-murder. He would be asked why he had done nothing to save Jensen that crime. They would load him with the entire responsibility. And he knew, now, with such a detestable clearness just what he could have done. He could have gone away! Jensen had been afraid. He had needed support and co-operation. He had always been like that, the creature of his audience. He had not even had the independence and the courage to die alone. And in dying before an audience he had in some awful way shifted the responsibility. He had not committed suicide. He had been murdered.

Seeley had no hope of escape from that deduction. Against any sophistry of which he might have been capable, against any long-drawn excuse on the grounds of expedience or sheer humanity, there remained the clear evidence of Jensen's room. Every familiar detail of it rose up and bore witness against him, and particularly that framed certificate which testified that Robert Graves Jensen had at the age of fourteen won honors in the Junior Cambridge Local Examination. He was a boy of such brilliant promise, the certificate proclaimed, the pride of his family and his school; and where is he now? He might at least have been saved for another two years. Perhaps for longer? There were no certainties in pathology. Any day a new lymph, a new treatment, a new diagnosis might be discovered, and Jensen's disease be pronounced curable.

Seeley had had no answer to that chal-

lenge. He had known that he was condemned from the moment that he had been left alone in the midst of all those living reminders of Jensen's personality. He had recognized himself as a criminal.

He was afraid of Jensen's room. It was clamorous with reproach; it threatened him with vengeance, plotting to retain a dozen evidences of his presence there, on this fatal night. There were two tumblers on the table, more cigarette ends in the ash-tray than one man could have consumed. He could not remember whether he had brought his pipe with him, and he dared not search the room for it. He must have left finger prints—on the glass, on the furniture . . . on the hypodermic syringe that had been the instrument of Jensen's death! The room would shout its accusation of him to the most perfunctory inquirer. Yet he could not stay to eliminate one single item of all the vast number of attestations against him. He would be sure to overlook something, and in any case he could not endure the horrible sense of guilt inspired by the thought of trying to destroy the evidences of his crime. He had but one desire—to escape, furtively, silently, in order that he might find a temporary sanctuary in his own home. There he would wait, free at least from the strident voices of this desperate room, until they came to arrest him.

But they had never come.

Sceley had not been called to give evidence at the inquest, nor had his name been mentioned in the course of the proceedings. No one had known that he had been there that night. There was nothing to connect him with Jensen's death. The verdict of suicide and the excuse of temporary insanity had been arrived at without a hint of hesitation. The coroner had spoken gently of Jensen's motive as revealed by the specialist who had condemned him. The coroner had almost suggested that, in the horrible circumstances, Jensen's act might find Divine condonation.

Yet Sceley continued to believe that they would presently come to fetch him. That room would not be content until justice was done. One day it would find a listener and deliver its secret. And, at last, the thought of that room steadfastly awaiting its opportunity hired him to go and see it again.

When he saw a card in the window announcing that the room was to be let furnished, a new idea came to him. He might take the room himself. If he did that he could keep other people out of it; give it no chance to speak to anyone of the secret that he, alone, shared with it.

A new servant opened the door for him when he rang; a bright, cheerful girl who seemed to welcome his inquiry.

"Yes, we got one room to let," she said, "a nice bed-sittin'-room. It's been empty ever since I come."

He hesitated on the threshold, bracing himself for the encounter, and asked her how long she had been in the house.

"Five weeks last Munday," she told him, so he knew that she had not come there until more than a week after the inquest.

"It's a good room for ten shillin' a week," she went on, "the cheapest room in the 'ouse. Jus' been done up an' all."

He went in boldly, then, and saw that the room had been gagged and stifled for all time. They had repapered its walls with a pink insanity of rosebuds, muffled its furniture in a ribald chintz, swathed and bound this ghastly tomb in the obscene gauds and fripperies of decent respectability.

He could have laughed at its complete frustration. It seemed to him like a resentful and protesting corpse, prinked and pampered into the likeness of youth.

"A nice, cheerful room, I call it," the new maid said.

He was free. The last witness against him had been muted and bound for all time. Once more he could lift his head and look the world in the face.

The next day he began to work again. He found that he could not work well.

The thing he had been trying to write before Jensen died, now seemed stale and tiresome. But he realized that something within him was burning for expression, and he was eager to give it form.

The idea that was so urgently seeking release leaped up clean and whole in his mind, as he lay in bed one morning, watching for the spring dawn. He had to write a story that should condemn the act of self-murder in any circumstances whatever. He must take a case like Jensen's, and show that however hopeless or intolerable the issue, it was better to await and suffer it than to attempt escape by suicide. In the story that leaped clean and whole into his mind the suicide's wife connived at his unjustifiable evasion. She loved him and could not bear the thought of his agony. She acted from the best and least selfish motives, but afterward she knew that she had been wrong. It was in the analysis of her subsequent remorse that he proved how wrong had been her act of connivance.

He found the writing of the story more difficult than he had expected, and he could not find any mode of expiation for the woman. The end of the story lingered in suspense. How could she find redemption, he wondered?

But that problem, also, was solved for him in the wakeful hours of the morning. He saw the solution printed in neat black letters on an oblong white card rather like the notice of "Apartments" in the window of Jensen's old room. And on the card of his illusion, also, there was but one word.

The word was *Confession*. The very sound of it soothed him. He saw at once how the woman of his story could find comfort. It seemed strange to him that he should not have thought of that obvious solution until it was presented to him in the aftermath of a dream. The one thing that still puzzled him was to decide who was the right person to be the woman's confessor. If she told her story to some sympathetic and tolerant friend she would find such easy absolu-

tion and there would be no atonement. That would be a mere evasion and could not satisfy her need. A true expiation demanded a greater penalty. She must "give herself up." The phrase surged into his mind with a peculiar force. He knew that it had a special, slightly technical meaning. He suddenly visualized not the woman of his story, but himself, making grotesque confession in the stark, incredulous surroundings of the police station.

In a fit of exasperation he leaped out of bed and began to dress. The solution was absurd and unpractical. They would not believe him. They would take his address and tell him to go home and think it over. At the utmost he would have to submit to a medical examination. He could hear the alienist advising him to take a complete rest. He would be told that this particular aberration was quite common; that the thought of his friend's death had preyed on his mind. They would absolutely refuse to try him, and he would be unable to produce a single tittle of evidence against himself.

Nevertheless, the longing to go to the police station and make his statement began to obsess him. He could not write any more, and he began subtly to tempt himself with the suggestion that if he gave himself up he would be able to report his actual experience in the story he wanted so desperately to finish. Yet, even so, would it be finished? If that woman of his assumption made her confession and it was dismissed as a nervous freak, she would still have failed to make atonement.

He decided that he must go away to the country to think it all out, go to some place removed from the distracting influences that surrounded him in London. More particularly he must escape from that foolish lure of the police station. He had taken to passing it every day in his walks. Once he had found himself actually marching up the front steps.

He had hoped that the tie which

bound him to London would, at some point of his journey, suddenly snap. He had pictured this tie in a strangely physical image, seeing himself held by a thread of almost infinite tenuity and strength that spun out endlessly behind him from its fount of origin in the police station. And he had believed that as he went out into the West Country he would at some time stand by the open window of the train and that, perhaps at his first sight of the sea, he would breathe a deep breath of relief, the sickening pull upon him would fail with an abruptness that would bring the ecstacy of immediate surcease from pain, and he would be free forever from this intolerable suggestion of a secret urgency to return to one particular place.

But, instead of snapping, the thread seemed to increase its drag upon him. His train was an express, running the first two hundred and thirty miles of its journey without a stop; and before he reached Plymouth the tensility had so far increased that he felt the pull of it as an actual physical restraint. When he paced the corridor he could only walk ahead with difficulty, but the return had the ease of a descent.

When the train was slowing into Plymouth he made a great effort of self-control and returned to his seat. He realized that, however hard the task, he must conquer this delusion. If any possible purpose could have been served by his going back to the police station and making a full statement of his complicity in Jensen's death, he would, so he told himself, have cheerfully yielded to the impulse. It was the utter absurdity and uselessness of the act that weighed with him. And he could think, now, of no way by which he might offer atonement.

There was but one other occupant of his compartment, a middle-aged, morose-looking man with whom he had not so far exchanged even a nod of greeting; but as another inducement to hold him in his seat while the train was at rest in the station, Seeley attempted, now, to begin a conversation.

"Do you know how long we stop here?" he asked.

The stranger glared at him malevolently. "Five minutes," he replied, curtly, and returned to the reading of his magazine.

And after that rebuff a new suspicion began to take hold of Seeley's imagination. Did he bear on his forehead the visible brand of Cain? Would his fellow men regard him henceforth with an increasing distrust, observing, though they might not recognize, the evidences of crime plainly written on his face? Instantly he recalled half a dozen apparent confirmations of this horrible suspicion. Only yesterday a woman had looked at him in the street with a hesitating, startled air; his landlady's manner had been very queer when she had asked him that morning whether he were coming back; surely the booking clerk at Paddington had stared at him with an unusual curiosity when he had taken his ticket; the waiter had seemed purposely to avoid him while he was having lunch in the restaurant car. . . . Tortured by a new dismay, Seeley began covertly to watch the faces of his fellow men.

And any lingering hope that he might have cherished was soon pitilessly crushed. Everyone stared at and mistrusted him, and when he reached St. Ives he had the greatest difficulty in persuading the hotel proprietor to take him in, although he explained, perhaps too apologetically, that it was only for one night, as he meant next day to find rooms for himself in the solemn obscurity of some neglected village out toward the Land's End.

When he went up to his bedroom, he noted, with a flash of impatience at his own weakness, that he was becoming absurdly absent-minded. He had actually forgotten to put on his tie that morning. Yet, after all, he reflected, what difference could that make to the appearance of a man who bore that dreadful brand above his eyes? He could see it plainly for himself, now—a burning scar that made him look as if he

had jammed his hat down too tightly upon his forehead.

That evening he avoided the other guests in the hotel with an even greater care than they displayed in avoiding him. Nevertheless, when he awoke the next morning, a new and delightful sense of freedom had come to him. His bedroom looked out over the sea, the April sun faced him above the headland, and a fresh breeze behind the tide was shepherding an interminable procession of brisk, sparkling waves that leaped and glittered and tossed here and there an occasional plume of foam in their brief traverse of the bay. It was a morning that shouted with the sturdy voice of an English spring, and Seeley believed that in some miraculous way he had found redemption at last. Perhaps he had won salvation and release by the splendid effort of resistance he had made in the train. By refusing to yield he had snapped the cord that had bound him to London. And when he looked at his reflection in the mirror he saw that the red scar had faded from his forehead.

He went down to breakfast sure of his reprieve, and it seemed to him that everyone was smiling. The proprietor of the hotel appeared quite sorry to hear that he was still determined not to stay another night. He set out on his drive to Zennor with a light heart.

The road out of the town reared itself straight up into the hills. Two miles ahead, Seeley could see the little cleft on the sky line through which he must pass, and in the sunlight of the fresh morning he pictured that pass as the gateway of his ultimate deliverance. "When I reach the summit," he thought, "I shall be free." But by the time he came to the crest of the hill the freshening southwest wind had driven a pack of dark clouds across the sun, and as he emerged from the shelter of the rise they had been breasting they met the force of the increasing gale. Before him, Seeley could see the rain rushing to meet them like a driven bank of mist.

Instantly the sense of happy release left him. He felt that the very powers of the air were combining to drive him back. Yet, even as he cowered to the onslaught of the squall, he made a new determination to persevere. "Only by courage and persistence," he said to himself, "can I withstand this persecution."

When he arrived at Zennor it seemed to him that the conspiracy against him was steadily growing. The owners of the houses to which he was driven to find a lodging regarded him with a sullen suspicion. He did not know that the Cornish people regard all "foreigners" with suspicion; he knew only that they all too obviously suspected him. He began, for a time, to fall back into his old hesitations, doubting whether, after all, he were wise to persist in his determination. But at last the driver of the cart, a morose and silent individual, suggested to him that he might try the inn at the Head, a mile farther on. "They're bound to take you there," he said, as if none but an innkeeper could ever be induced to receive so undesirable a lodger.

They did, indeed, accept him at the inn, though without the least sign of heartiness. When the proprietor asked him how long he wished to stay, he replied defiantly that he would stay at least a week. He half expected that the man would demur, but he merely nodded—accepting his fate, so Seeley inferred, with a stubborn resignation.

When he stood before the toilet glass in his bedroom he found that the red brand above his eyes had returned, and that now it was deeper and redder than before. . . .

The next morning he decided to go out immediately after breakfast. He meant to seek some absolute solitude in which he might commune with and persuade himself that courage alone was necessary in order to obtain his freedom. But at the outset he was faced with a difficulty. If he went eastward, he would be going toward Zennor with its inimical and threatening population of men and women. And he was not sure if he had

the strength to go still farther west, for then he would have to contest every yard against the entangling, dragging resistance of the attraction that would draw him back to the terrible magnet of the London police station.

"Courage, courage!" he said aloud, to embolden himself, and found that the innkeeper was watching him with an even greater suspicion than he had shown the night before. . . .

He attempted a compromise by going northwest, straight out to the cliff's edge, leaning powerfully over to his left to counterbalance the persistent drag on his other side. He dared not look in the direction of London. He knew that if he did he would see the police station through the curve of the earth, hailing and commanding him.

He met only one human being in the course of his walk to the cliff—a small boy who ran from him in terror.

The cliff must have been at least sixty feet high, and, looking down onto the clean stretch of hard sand beneath, he found a temporary solution of his immediate difficulty. He dared not go east; he had not the strength to go farther west; but he knew of no reason why he should not go down to the sand. Without further hesitation he stepped boldly forward.

For a time he hung nearly motionless between earth and sky—long enough for him to review in the most precise and extravagant detail every thought and incident of his life since he had witnessed the suicide of Jensen. Then, quite suddenly, the flat bed of sand below leaped up and struck him with a brutal, disruptive crash.

He was amazed to find himself miraculously unhurt. He had risen from the sand and walked down almost to the edge of the sea before he realized the wonder of the discovery. He had fallen sixty feet onto hard sand, and suffered not so much as a bruise. There could be but one explanation. He bore a charmed life. No doubt the Eternal Purpose had

some use for him. Sometime, somewhere, he would fulfill his strange destiny. Meanwhile he seemed momentarily to have recovered his freedom. The sun was shining again, every cloud had disappeared from the sky, and the sea, which before his fall had been rolling up in white-capped breakers, was now exquisitely calm and placid. Perhaps he had lain stunned on the sand for quite a long time before he came back to a realization of his miraculous escape? He drew out his watch, but as he looked at it, it fell to a dust of splinters in his hand. His watch, at least, had not escaped the effects of his fall.

Presently he decided to make an exploration of the sands while this blissful sense of enlargement remained with him. He looked first to the west, but a bold headland of rock projected on that side, and, even as he watched, the incoming tide came forward with a sudden spurt and lapped about the base of the projecting tongue of land. The cliff was too high and sheer to climb, so, with a complacent shrug of his shoulders, he set his face back toward London. He found that he no longer felt so intense a desire to struggle against that impulse, although he was still determined that when the opportunity presented itself he would return to the inn. . . .

The country was wilder and more mountainous than he had imagined it. Last night he had had to keep his eyes almost closed against the assault of the wind and rain, and this morning he had been too preoccupied with the achievement of his object to spare a thought for the scenery. But, now that he had come up from the shore, he found that he was shut off from the west by towering crags of basalt piled up far into the sky. There must, he knew, be some road or pass through these mountains, but he could see none.

He paused for a time, uncertain what to do. Even if he decided to go back to London, he must return first to the inn for his luggage. And then, slowly an immense and desolating feeling of loneli-

ness began to overtake him. He was, lost at the foot of these bleak mountains, a stranger among unfriendly people. He knew no one and he had nowhere to go. He was utterly and everlastingly alone in this desolation, with no purpose, no desire, except that strange urgency, increasing now with a renewed insistent compulsion, to return to London.

Suddenly he decided to resist that call no longer. Life without peace of mind, without any rest or contentment, was unendurable. He could at least make his confession. Even if they would not believe him, he might find release in the very act of admitting his sin. And with that decision he instantly set off running toward the east.

It seemed to him that he ran with incredible speed. Indeed, now and again, he had a queer illusion that his feet were not touching the ground, that he was flying with an extraordinary ease and swiftness. Yet when he turned and looked back over his shoulder he found that the wall of basalt crags was still close behind him, and all about him stretched the same bleak, inhospitable wilderness.

He threw himself down, then, with his face to the ground. He was beaten and destroyed. The whole world, animate and inanimate, was in league against him. He could do nothing. He would lie there till they found him awaiting judgment.

Yet, as he made this new resolve, he knew that he had not the power to keep it. The earth fell away from beneath him and left him poised in mid-air. He opened his eyes and saw below him a smooth expanse of hard sand, and on it was the figure of a man, lying on his back, with his arms outstretched, and his blind face open to the sky. . . .

With infinite slowness he was being drawn down toward the figure on the sand. He had no power of resisting the force that compelled him. It was as if he were being tediously hauled in, hand over hand, and presently he was floating only a few feet above the body. He had known, now, for long ages that it was his own body that lay there, and he waited patiently for the end. All sensation and all volition had left him. He had no longer any feeling, either of desire or fear.

As he touched the body the world began to grow dark, and the darkness deepened steadily as he descended until he entered the ultimate void of blackness and insensibility.

He opened his eyes to the sound of a voice pronouncing judgment. "He'll be a cripple for life, for all intents and purposes," the voice said.

But Seeley only smiled at the judgment. He knew with exquisite certainty that he had made atonement. He was aware of a sweet and enduring serenity.